



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

**DECISION NOTICE for the Draft Environmental Assessment:
Elk Island WMA Agricultural Lease
Region 7 Headquarters
PO Box 1630, Miles City, MT 59301
(406) 234-0900**

February 21, 2017

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION:

Elk Island WMA was purchased by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to maintain a woodland/cropland complex to benefit a diversity of wildlife while maximizing hunting opportunities, primarily for white-tailed deer and pheasants. The proposed action is to renew share-crops agreement on 170 ac of the WMA. The lessees will cultivate and retain a portion of the hay/grain crop harvest, leaving the remaining crop standing for wildlife use during winter months.

The benefit and purpose of the leases are to provide winter habitat and forage, primarily for pheasants, deer, and turkeys. Standing crops also benefit migrating waterfowl and a variety of other wildlife species. The area is open to public hunting during all commission-approved seasons, and provides opportunity for deer, upland game bird, and waterfowl hunting.

ALTERNATIVE TO PROPOSED ACTION:

Alternative A: No Action:

Agricultural leases will not be renewed and agricultural lands will not be cultivated. This alternative would require MFWP to commit resources to manage weeds on the previously cultivated 170 acres of farm fields. Wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of wintering habitat and forage resources.

Alternative B: Proposed Action: Agricultural leases will be renewed for 170 ac of cropland. Wildlife will benefit because high-quality wintering habitat and forage will be available. The lessee, MFWP and sportsmen will mutually benefit through the sharecrop agreement.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS:

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this

proposal (Elk Island Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease) on February 3, 2017, and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on February 17, 2017

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published in the *Glendive Ranger Review* and the *Sidney Herald*. Copies of the environmental assessment were distributed to neighboring landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments"). An FWP statewide news release was issued and posted on FWP's website (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "News Releases").

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received three comments regarding the proposed lease; two in favor and one that seemed to be opposed to the proposed lease, but also included many comments outside the scope of this EA. Comments are listed in their entirety at the end of this document.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

"Fields that used to be heavy with CRP type grass cover, interspaced with food plots are now little more than short, no cover pasture land."

FWP Response: Outside the scope of this EA. None of the agricultural activities covered by this EA are pasture land. However, a separate EA in 2013 addressed using grazing as a tool to introduce disturbance, revitalize aging grass stands, and slow the expansion of smooth brome grass in several fields on Elk Island WMA.

"When the canal company tore out the excellent winter cover adjacent to the West side of Elk Island WMA, FWP did nothing to restore that type of quality cover elsewhere on the area. These habitat changes have been going on for over a decade on Elk Island and FWP has done nothing to correct the problem."

FWP Response: Outside the scope of this EA. However, the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project has an easement to maintain ditches and periodically removes woody cover as part of regular maintenance. Winter cover is abundant in the Yellowstone river riparian zone, and is not limiting to pheasant populations. Over the past decade, FWP has added to the WMA, retired two areas from farming where natural woody regeneration is occurring, and two shelterbelts were planted in 2016 to augment existing woody cover and hold pheasants on the WMA during hunting season.

"This year the cover was so bad, that on opening day I didn't flush a single pheasant, in area's where I used to flush dozens...some years it was hundreds. With there being so little cover, I can't say I'm surprised. The share cropper plants little in the way of crops that will hold pheasants. This year it was sugar beets, which are worthless to pheasants once they are harvested. And even if they aren't harvested they are worthless for feed. Perhaps most startling, FWP doesn't care. If they did this wouldn't be allowed to continue for so long."

FWP Response: This is inaccurate. Beets were certainly not the only crop produced on the WMA. Sharecroppers adhered to agreements wherein they left 25% of agricultural acres in food

plots (corn, small grain, or food plot mixes), and 35% of irrigated alfalfa acres standing for wildlife. Some (but not all) fields were planted to sugar beets, which is a normal crop rotation practice in the lower Yellowstone River valley. Crop rotations are important to minimize losses to agricultural pests, maintain soil health, and to recruit and retain competent sharecroppers given low commodity prices on small grains in recent years. The sharecroppers must be able to maintain financially viable farming operations. The main benefit of any harvested agricultural field for wildlife is in crops wasted by harvesting equipment, not winter cover, but wildlife benefit greatly from food and cover offered by standing crops planted in accordance with sharecropper agreements.

"I've hunted Elk Island for pheasants for nearly 30 years. In that time I've seen it go from a consistent producer of excellent hunting opportunities to being nearly worthless for pheasant hunting. To say it's been mismanaged would be a huge understatement....As a place to walk and exercise Elk Island is nice....but then so is the Sidney city park. As a place to hunt pheasants, you may as well save the gas and hunt the city park. You'll do just as well."

FWP Response: Outside the scope of this EA, but the WMA management plan does incorporate nest cover, winter food, and winter cover necessary to maintain robust pheasant populations on the WMA. Fall flush counts revealed abundant pheasants throughout the WMA, and hunter checks conducted by the area Game Warden and Biologist indicate the WMA was used consistently by hunters throughout the season.

DECISION NOTICE

Utilizing the EA and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed action.

FWP's analysis supports the agricultural lease of Elk Island WMA as proposed. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend the implementation of the agricultural lease for Elk Island WMA.

The Final EA may be viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov> or be obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 7 Headquarters, P.O. Box 1630, Miles City, Mt. 59301 (406) 234-0900.



Brad R. Schmitz
R7 Regional Supervisor

February 21, 2017

Date

Public Comments:

Name: Russell Garcia

City: Glendive, MT

I support the renewal of the agricultural lease for the Elk Island Wildlife Management Area.

Name:

City:

I've hunted Elk Island for pheasants for nearly 30 years. In that time I've seen it go from a consistent producer of excellent hunting opportunities to being nearly worthless for pheasant hunting. To say it's been mismanaged would be a huge understatement.

Fields that used to be heavy with CRP type grass cover, interspaced with food plots are now little more than short, no cover pasture land. When the canal company tore out the excellent winter cover adjacent to the West side of Elk Island WMA, FWP did nothing to restore that type of quality cover elsewhere on the area. These habitat changes have been going on for over a decade on Elk Island and FWP has done nothing to correct the problem.

This year the cover was so bad, that on opening day I didn't flush a single pheasant, in area's where I used to flush dozens...some years it was hundreds. With there being so little cover, I can't say I'm surprised. The share cropper plants little in the way of crops that will hold pheasants. This year it was sugar beets, which are worthless to pheasants once they are harvested. And even if they aren't harvested they are worthless for feed. Perhaps most startling, FWP doesn't care. If they did this wouldn't be allowed to continue for so long.

As a place to walk and exercise Elk Island is nice....but then so is the Sidney city park. As a place to hunt pheasants, you may as well save the gas and hunt the city park. You'll do just as well.

Name: Bert Otis

City: Emigrant

Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission,

Sometimes the old saying "If it ain't broke don't fix it" is a pretty good saying. In this case the existing lease seems to be working for everyone, so I think you should stay with it.

Bert Otis
